

EPILOGUE PART III

Taking Students' Ideas Seriously

Moving beyond the History-Heritage Dichotomy

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With the best of intentions, beginning teachers often include contemporary artistic media in their lessons – popular songs, film clips, visual images, and so on. Relying on works they find especially compelling, they hope to engage students in gripping and emotional analyses of difficult curricular topics. They anticipate that familiar sources will lead to conceptual understanding more effectively than textbooks or other traditional print media. Unfortunately, teachers rarely get the results they hope for: students may ridicule the works, be bored by them, or interpret them in unexpected ways. This can be a frustrating and jarring experience for beginners.

A colleague recently told me that he cautions young teachers never to use artistic works they love, because when students dismiss or ignore those beloved objects, 'it will break your heart'. I suggested a broader principle: Whenever teachers expect students to draw a single lesson from their presentations – in whatever format – they will be disappointed. Students are active constructors of meaning, and when given a chance to express their ideas (such as being asked to interpret a popular song), they will draw upon diverse knowledge, interests and identities to produce unique understandings. The results are unpredictable. Students may not see *Rage Against The Machine's* 'Bombtrack' as a biting critique of capitalism, no matter how obvious that interpretation seems to their teacher. And just as importantly, they may not care.

The chapters in this section illustrate this tension – in schools, museums or other settings – between educators' goals and learners' ideas. Klein

identifies engagement as a central dimension of the composition of past-present relations in education. He suggests a continuum from viewing students as passive receivers of historical knowledge to conceiving of them as active performers who produce meanings for themselves. This may be the most important dimension of all history education, as the success of a variety of efforts hinges on the extent to which learners are encouraged to develop their own interpretations. Indeed, students will develop their own interpretations, whether they are asked to or not. Educators who promote and accept such open-ended construction of meaning are less likely to be disappointed than those whose aim is narrower.

The attempt to impose interpretation is often evident in representations of the Holocaust. Educators routinely believe that learning about this event will lead students to develop greater tolerance, respect for human dignity, or willingness to take action in the face of oppression or discrimination. The educational project *The War Nearby*, analysed by Klein, was rooted in the desire for a straightforward moral lesson, and although the historian responsible for the assignments resisted this effort and developed relatively open-ended tasks, she nonetheless acknowledged that her primary goals were to make sure that children accepted that the Holocaust occurred and spoke respectfully about its victims. Had they not done so, she presumably would have been disappointed in the project's efforts.

Educational treatments of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement carry similar implicit and explicit lessons. Binnenkade aptly describes the function of this topic in U.S. schools as a kind of parable, a story meant to change students' hearts and minds forever. This parable aims to encourage democratic agency, promote racial reconciliation, dismiss the legitimacy of violence, and illustrate the success of the U.S. national project. Such identification with national projects is one of the most common ways in which history is used to impart particular lessons. De Bruijn, for example, shows how the Portsmouth D-Day museum encourages a sense of national identification by emphasizing the collective contributions of Britain's population and the military's determination in the face of isolation and long odds.

The widespread antagonism toward including Palestinian perspectives in history teaching in Israeli, noted by Goldberg, is yet another example of the desire to use history to encourage national identification. Notably, students are not simply expected to identify with the nation; on both sides of the conflict, they are expected to identify with a particular vision of the nation, through one-sided, self-justifying accounts that delegitimize and dehumanize the other community. More comprehensive or balanced narratives, it is widely assumed, would weaken such identification and should therefore be avoided.

Learners, though, have a remarkable capacity to ignore, resist or adapt the lessons they are supposed to learn. Research on U.S. Christian students'

understanding of the Holocaust, for example, shows that rather than becoming committed to human dignity, students sometimes interpret the Holocaust in light of theological narratives of hope and redemption (e.g., they think the Holocaust was a necessary part of God's plan for the redemption of the world), or even through a lens of anti-Semitism.¹ Similarly, research from Northern Ireland shows that students there often combine the dispassionate and balanced historical accounts they encounter in schools with the more partisan and emotional perspectives that circulate in their communities. This results in individualistic interpretations that do not neatly mirror either school or community perspectives.²

The disparity between educators' hopes (or fears) and the ideas of students are evident in the chapters by Goldberg and Binnenkade. Goldberg shows that the presence of multiple perspectives in a lesson did not undermine national identification, and that the absence of such perspective did not promote it. This is hardly surprising: a short intervention cannot be expected to overcome a lifetime of exposure to the ideas of families, communities, media, popular culture and political discourse. And most educational interventions are indeed short ones: a single lesson, a trip to a museum, a commemoration or a ceremony. Even when historical events are addressed as part of larger units of study, they typically constitute only a small portion of learners' exposure to topics such as the Second World War, the Holocaust, Civil Rights, or national identity.

Binnenkade's description of students' resistance to learning about Civil Rights demonstrates an even more extreme disjuncture between educational aims and students' reactions. Rather than absorbing the lessons the topic is meant to convey, students laugh, joke, disengage or object to the portrayal of African Americans as victims. Their school lessons, after all, address topics – such as race relations and privilege – with which students have a lifetime of experience, and in which they are immersed on a daily basis. They already have ideas about these topics, and they express them – explicitly or covertly – in their response to instruction.

But if it is naïve to think that students will willingly and directly incorporate the goals of formal history education into their thinking, it is also misleading to assume that they have pre-existing frames of reference that render them impervious to such efforts. Children and adolescents are more active, their thinking more complicated, than either of these perspectives would suggest. In the area of national identity, for example, students do not simply accept or reject the messages they encounter in formal education; instead, these are among the many ideas they encounter, and students draw from them as resources in constructing their own sense of belonging within religious, ethnic or political communities.³ Some students – and some groups of students – rely more heavily on official narratives, some more on

alternative ones that circulate outside official channels. But to think that students are the unwitting dupes of any single set of sources misrepresents their ideas and experiences.

Students' active construction of meaning is especially evident in Savenije's chapter. Many Western educators hold an image of Muslim youth as intolerant and anti-Semitic, but such portrayals say less about the reality of students' perspectives than about educators' attempts to construct their own, Western identities in terms of enlightened tolerance.⁴ Savenije's chapter shows how three Moroccan students found a museum lesson on the history of the Second World War (and specifically the persecution of Jews) interesting and important. The students did not have identical perspectives on the significance of the events they studied, but the encounter deepened their understanding of history, and the tasks associated with the exhibition led them to engage in sophisticated conversations about what these events meant to themselves and to others, as well as about how identity influences perspectives on history.

Goldberg's chapter provides another example of students' open-minded engagement with difficult historical topics. When Arab and Israeli students jointly discussed a controversial event in the region's past, they demonstrated the kinds of intellectual and discursive strategies that are at the heart of both academic learning and democratic processes: they were non-confrontational, despite the political importance of the event they were discussing; they were interested in and empathetic toward each others' perspectives, and they accepted and integrated those without surrendering their own views; and the dominant group frequently and willingly acknowledged minority perspectives, a practice which led to mutual trust. These are precisely the kinds of outcomes any educators would hope for.

Why, then, were students in these settings so reflective, engaged and open-minded, when it is so easy to distort, resist or ignore formal history education? The answer must lie, at least in part, in the non-directive nature of the tasks in which they took part. Savenije's description of the 'Child in War' exhibition suggests no overt attempt to impose particular interpretations or approaches on its subject. Instead, it exhibited personal stories and belongings donated by people with experiences of the Second World War, and students were left to develop their own ideas about their significance and about the exhibition's theme – the very-opened question of how war changes children's lives. Students completed two tasks that also appear to have been very open-ended: writing an imaginary dialogue between two people they had investigated, and creating a script for a documentary. Students no doubt brought their prior perspectives to these tasks, but the children that Savenije studied did not do so in a defensive or close-minded way, perhaps because there was nothing for them to resist. A similar dynamic

appears to characterize the task that Goldberg's students faced: they were given two controversial questions of obvious historical and political importance, but their discussions were self-facilitated and did not involve any overt attempt to direct them toward particular conclusions or interpretive strategies. In Klein's formulation, students in both settings were being treated as active performers, not passive recipients.

Klein implies that the position along the engagement continuum taken by educators is one way of distinguishing 'history' from 'heritage'. Endeavours that are easily characterized as heritage – such as nationalistic commemorations, moralistic museum exhibitions or patriotic textbooks – certainly fall on the passive end of this continuum: learners are expected to reach particular conclusions about the people or events being portrayed. But it is important to recognize that Klein's distinction is more broadly applicable, and that treating students as passive recipients can just as easily characterize activities that are usually thought of as 'history' rather than 'heritage'. Representations of the past both in and out of schools can seek to impose specific identities on students or lead to particular moral lessons, but they can also aim at narrow and alienating forms of intellectual analysis.

Educators who align themselves with what they take to be 'history' rather than 'heritage' often exclude certain ways of understanding the past. Both Klein and De Bruijn, for example, champion the value of historical distance. For Klein, history involves seeing the past as different than the present, mastering one's emotions, and setting aside present values. He doubts that approaches that emphasize proximity, by making the past familiar and continuous with the present, 'have much to do with "history"'. Similarly, De Bruijn connects heritage with techniques that stimulate temporal proximity and 'play' to emotions, and he characterizes historical inquiry as involving a 'detached' stance; like Klein, he equates history with distance and a disavowal of identification with past actors. Only detachment, he suggests, can lead students to consider multiple perspectives, a crucial goal of history education.

Yet students in the chapters by Savenije and Goldberg were not asked to take a detached stance, not asked to distance past from present, not asked to set aside their values, identities or present-day commitments. These approaches were, in fact, integral parts of the tasks and of students' engagement. For two of the students in Savenije's study, their religious backgrounds encouraged empathy and a concern with the fate of people at the time; the immediacy of the physical objects was also a stimulus to reflection on the use of history rather than an obstacle to understanding. The importance of present-day concerns is even more obvious in Goldberg's study. These students addressed a question with significant contemporary importance, one that brought forth committed and emotional responses that were grounded in religious and political identities. It was the very proximity of the issue that

made students care enough about it to consider it deeply and reflectively. Had they been given a task with no contemporary significance, they probably would not have engaged so thoughtfully; had they been asked to set aside their identities, they likely would have resisted the task itself.

The chapters by Goldberg, Savenije and Binnenkade all point to the futility of trying to establish 'history' as an educational undertaking distinct from 'heritage'. To pretend that people can set aside their identities when studying history, or to suggest that they should do so, seems pointless. Why should we ask students to give up what they care about in order to study the past? Why should we ask them to set aside present-day concerns? Why should we ask them to silence their emotional reactions? Presumably, all history educators want students to care about the past as a meaningful object of study. If that is the case, then it seems tortuously unproductive to try to develop students' involvement by asking them to suppress all they care about.⁵ Even educators who hold onto the goal of detachment must confront the empirical evidence that students consistently resist the call to deny themselves: when asked to become passive recipients of historical procedures, students ignore, resist or reinterpret what they are meant to learn. Students' participation in history mirrors findings from research on discussion of political issues: students don't like to be indoctrinated.⁶ And telling students they must distance themselves from the past is just as much a form of indoctrination as telling them that they must not.

The alternative to imposing interpretations – whether those developed in popular or academic communities of memory – is not to allow students to develop whatever interpretations they like, for there is no educational value in directionless chatter. A more productive route is to ask students to develop their own criteria for meaningful historical interpretations. Rather than supplying them with a set of strictures developed in the academy, they can be asked to consider what makes some ideas about the past more meaningful than others, and to reflect on the very nature of 'meaningful'. Goldberg's students, for example, presumably came to see that an argument that takes account of differing perspective is more effective than one that ignores them; this is one of the most basic principles of all intellectual endeavour. Some educators might object that students' historical interpretations are likely to be lacking in evidence, but one of the first questions in any disagreement is 'How do you know that?' The task for educators (and researchers) is to clarify which situations are most likely to result in these kinds of productive engagement.

Students can also consider how people construct meaning about the past, and how identification influences those meanings. Even the young students in Savenije's study were able to do that, as they reflected on the differing meanings that the exhibition held for themselves and others. In addition to thinking about how people make sense of the past for themselves,

students can consider how public institutions represent the past, and for what purposes. This is surprisingly easy: in any educational context (schools, museums, commemorations), students can simply be asked 'What story is being told here? Why do you think it's being told that way? What's left out? How might someone else tell the story differently, and why?'. This suggests another productive avenue for investigation: how do students reason, not about the past, but about the construction of the past? Although at first glance this seems an academic exercise, students themselves are immersed in such representations, and helping them reflect on the use of history – by drawing upon rather than ignoring their own perspectives – fulfills the goal of treating them as active performers rather than passive recipients. Students may not always reach the conclusions we expect, but we are less likely to be disappointed by their thinking.

Notes

1. S. Schweber and R. Irwin, "Especially Special": Learning about Jews in a Fundamentalist Christian School', *Teachers College Record* 105 (2003): 1693–1719; K. Spector, 'God on the Gallows: Reading the Holocaust through Narratives of Redemption', *Research in the Teaching of English* 42 (2007): 7–55; K. Spector and S. Jones, 'Constructing Anne Frank: Critical Literacy and the Holocaust in Eighth-grade English', *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 51 (2007): 36–48.
2. K.C. Barton and A.W. McCully, 'Trying to "See Things Differently": Northern Ireland Students' Struggle to Understand Alternative Historical Perspectives', *Theory and Research in Social Education* 40 (2012): 371–408.
3. K.C. Barton, 'School History as a Resource for Constructing Identities: Implications of Research from the United States, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand', in *History Education and the Construction of National Identities*, eds M. Carretero, M. Asensio and M. Rodríguez-Moneo, Charlotte NC, 2012, 93–107.
4. T.R. Abu el-Haj, "The Beauty of America": Nationalism, Education, and the War on Terror', *Harvard Educational Review* 80 (2010): 242–274.
5. K.C. Barton, 'The Denial of Desire: How to Make History Education Meaningless', in *National History Standards: The Problem of the Canon and the Future of Teaching History*, eds L. Symcox and A. Wilschut, Greenwich CT, 2009, 265–282.
6. D.E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, New York, 2009.

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